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ABSTRACT

This paper examines gender messages within television advertisements. Society is shaped by the suggestions of television advertisers who influence consumers' beliefs on how people should look or act, and many of these advertisements perpetuate stereotypes. Any consideration of the influence of gender stereotyping within TV advertising must first examine the stereotypes within television programming and advertising in general. Prime time dramatic programming features between two to three males to every female character. Typically, women are younger than men and depicted as feminine with a focus on beauty and sexual attractiveness. Men, instead, are usually authority figures or models of expertise even when shown at leisure (the outdoors, sports, cars and driving, relaxing, or entertaining at home). These images are often defined by advertisers. Most of the experts and voiceovers in commercials are male. Children's programming and advertising follow the typical adult stereotypes. Children aged two to five view an average of 22,228 commercials per year; by the time a person has reached 40, they have seen up to one million commercials. Over the last 25 years, television has played an increasingly important role in a child's socialization process. There are four types of endorsements that are most likely to affect a child's self-concept: personal enhancement; social status appeals; product usage portrayals; and competitive product appeals. To offset the stereotypes presented by television programming and commercials, it is important to teach television viewing skills. Skills such as identifying explicit and implicit promises, differentiating among verbal, nonverbal, and visual content and their intended effects, recognizing persuasive techniques, and comprehending commonly used vocabulary are important outcomes in learning to evaluate commercials. Recognition of the blatant and more subtle gender messages is the first step toward resisting the persuasive power of gender-stereotyped televised messages. (AEF)

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Gender Stereotypes and Selling Techniques in Television Advertising: Effects on Society

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Abstract

This paper examines gender messages within television advertisements. It clearly shows the need for awareness and education about blatant and subtle messages that carry forth the ideas of gender stereotypes throughout our society. The authors raise issues about impact of advertising on personal beliefs, value systems, and self-concept.

Television advertising is big business. What started out in 1941 as a simple talking head that aired for $9.00 has turned into an $850,000 spot for the Super Bowl broadcast (Rutherford, 1994). In the United States, commercial advertisers pay stations according to the size of the audience they deliver. Because television stations do not earn money from the general public that they serve, they are responsible to the advertisers, not to the public. Ploghoft (1982) makes a crude, but accurate, analogy between marketing strategies of television and livestock industries. The analogy simply says that the job is to round up the herd by whatever means are necessary, then present it to the buyers. The buyers, then inspect the offering to make sure it is of the kind and quality desired. The herd of television viewers must meet the needs of the paying advertisers. Like cattle, if the audience is too old, too young, or not the right kind, a popular show may be dropped because the advertiser is targeting a different audience.

The way that advertisers target television audiences is not subtle and due to the great mass of the viewing public, the repeated marketing messages greatly influence in our beliefs and buying habits. Thus society is shaped by suggestions of television advertisers whose motives are to sell products and who greatly influence our beliefs about what we should buy, how we should look, how we should act, and who should do what. A great majority of these messages perpetuate stereotypes, either blatantly or subtly. Thus, many advertisements tout the strength and confidence of males in terms of work, money, and power, while they target the female audience for glamour, home, and child care products. Technology as a means of work or power, like financial matters, targets the male domain in terms of both quantity and quality of use. Like the market for video games, the home computing market offers promise but so far, it caters to a male audience. Any consideration of the influence of gender stereotyping within technology advertising, must examine first the stereotypes within television programming and advertising in general.

Gender Stereotypes in TV Ads

Prime time dramatic programming features between two or three males to every female character. Women are likely to be younger than men and tend to be cast in limited, stereotypical roles with clerical work as the most common job. In the real labor force, women outnumber men as teachers and restaurant workers but in the world of television, this is reversed. Thus male roles appear to be important in terms of numbers, leadership, and role models.

Typically, women are depicted as feminine and showing their beauty, grace, style, and sexual attractiveness. Yet the imagery of feminism is defined by the television producers and advertisers, not by real women in real life. In addition, advertisers like to show women shopping, cleaning, cooking, and looking after others. In the never-ending war on dirt, the act of cleaning takes on a meaning of love, order, and conformity. Thus the image of the homemaker providing a haven of harmonious safety, regardless of the state of the outside world and its many threats, is flashed repeatedly before the eyes of the viewing public (Rutherford, 1994).

On the other hand, men are associated with the outdoors, sports, cars and driving, relaxing, or entertaining at home (Rutherford, 1994). Roles within the work and home environments that command expertise or authority, such as recommendations for finances, insurance, making decisions for senior adults, or offering professional opinions, typically feature men. In addition, adult males are usually the announcers or authoritative voices for products, even for products mainly used by women.

Most of the experts and voice overs in commercials are male because advertisers operate on the assumption that men can sell more products due to their voice of authority. However, research shows that women's voices are

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just as effective in motivating audiences to buy products (Savan, 1994). For example, after viewing ads for Listerine and Nestle's Morsels in both male or female voice over versions, test audiences chose those products equally, regardless of which version they had heard. In fact, they often couldn't recall if the voice over was male or female (Savan, 1994).

The pervasive gender messages that run throughout the programming and advertisements are not limited to adult imagery. Children's programming and advertising follow the typical adult stereotypes. In fact, the very structure of the advertising message is skewed, so the audience becomes attuned to recognizing the commercials by a quick glance or by hearing them even when they are not watching a full commercial. The male-oriented commercials contain more cuts, loud music, and boisterous activity, whereas female-oriented commercials contain more fades and dissolves, soft music, and quiet play (Signorielli, 1993). It is typical to see boys playing outside while girls play inside, with camera angles pointing up to make the boys look dominant, while they point down and make the girls look smaller.

While gender stereotypes have changed over the years, there is a code that identifies feminine and masculine characteristics as portrayed in current television advertising. Rutherford (1994) provides the following examples as shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Gender Stereotypes in Television Advertisements

	Feminine	**Masculine**
Physique	weak	strong
Traits	emotional delicate warm sociable narcissistic	rational rugged cool competitive masterful
Display	body	authority
Domains	home private	workplace public

How Many Commercials Do We Watch?

The National Association of Broadcasting code states that during each hour of prime time and weekend children's programming, the maximum amount of nonprogram material is limited to nine and one half minutes. During weekday children's programming, 12 minutes are allowed per hour, and 16 minutes per hour at all other times. This averages out to 17 commercials per hour. Children of ages two through five years view an average of 22,338 commercial advertisements per year and children of ages six through eleven view 18,856 per year. We have seen one million commercials by the age of forty (Adler, Lesser, Meringoff, Robertson, Rossiter, & Ward, 1980). These figures represent the numbers of commercials within television programming, and might be somewhat higher than what the typical person really watches, due to viewing habits. The remote control encourages "channel grazing," so as many as 60 percent of the people might not actively attend to the television during commercial breaks, and perhaps only 25 percent of the viewers actually watch commercials (Rutherford, 1994).

On the other hand, many children whose minds wander during programming, snap back to attention when they hear the louder volume of television commercials. About 33 percent graze, zap, or channel surf because they are dissatisfied with the channel they are watching, wish to avoid a commercial, or are afraid they are missing something better on another channel. The largest segment of grazers is found in the 18-34 year age group. There are also MTV kids who may not see any commercials at all. By 'zoning out', they create a video mosaic, which has no

theme, but consists of a conglomeration of pretty pictures with no common link. These people are watching television, but not attending to a program theme (Evans, 1994). Although, we may not know the precise number of commercials that people watch, there is no doubt that the commercial advertisements impact our perceptions and attitudes toward others.

Effects on Children

The way that people learn about their culture, its values, belief systems, perspectives, and social norms is called socialization. Traditionally, socialization was taught by parents, peers, schools, and churches. Over the last 25 years, the mass media has played a more important role in the socialization process, mainly due to the influence of television. A television can be found in nearly every home, requires minimal skill for understanding, is highly visual, and is very familiar and appealing to children. Television may play a central role in a child's social life by providing common experiences that promote conversations and peer group cohesiveness (Signorielli, 1993). Further, children may find endorsements of their self-concept through social experiences.

There are four types of endorsements that are most likely to affect a child's self-concept. These are personal enhancement appeals, social status appeals, product usage portrayals, and competitive product appeals (Adler, et al, 1980). Each is explained in the following paragraphs. As you read them, consider how television commercials carry impact in each area.

Personal Enhancement

Personal enhancement appeals range from temporary to more permanent states. The temporary effects include such things as fun and adventure while the more permanent states include such things as strength, health, or well-being. While all ages of people can be affected by false claims, young children are particularly vulnerable to inauthentic portrayals or hypothetical claims made in commercials. A wide assortment of ads for health and beauty products, clothing, and foods present a common theme about women's values. The theme implies that the typical woman is preoccupied with the value of beauty, and that she will strive to turn herself into a work of art for the promise of self-esteem and popularity with men. In reality many girls can be persuaded by such commercial messages.

A study that exposed one group of high school girls to beauty commercials and another group to neutral commercials reported differences in the girls' beliefs about the value of beauty in terms of being popular with males. The girls who viewed the beauty commercials believed that beauty is significantly more important for being popular with males than the girls who saw the neutral commercials. In addition, those girls exposed to the beauty commercials also rated beauty as more important to them personally than those who saw neutral commercials (Signorielli, 1993).

Social Status Appeals

Social status appeals imply that ownership of a product will lead to increased social status. Although, the National Association of Broadcasting prohibited open display of such appeals, they do exist, at least on a subtle basis. These kinds of advertisements typically influence older children for whom peer acceptance is more important for their self-concept. Many advertisements promote life styles which the average viewer can only dream about, and due to the disparity between the commercials and their own life, may create a sense of powerlessness, frustration, and lower self-worth. The affluent life style contrasted with the reality of poverty can lead some people to criminal activities, such as stealing or making false benefit claims (Young, 1990).

Product Usage Portrayals

Product usage portrayals include exaggerated suggestions of a product's play value or performance characteristics. This includes such things as making products appear easier to use than they are in reality. For example, the product might be portrayed in a way that appears easy to use, yet children might find it difficult to operate. If a child cannot imitate the advertisement and use the product successfully, it may lead to dissatisfaction with the product and actually harm a child's self-concept through feelings of frustration and failure.

Competitive Product Appeals

Competitive product appeals include covert competitive claims of implied superiority. These types of claims are found in about 11 percent of children's commercial advertisements, despite the National Association of Broadcasting's prohibition. The quality hierarchy of "good-better-best" is changed in advertising to "good-best-better" because it is more difficult for an advertiser to support a claim of "better" that one of "best." Children may not be able to discriminate parity claims for what they really are, and they may feel disappointed with presently owned products after viewing a commercial that aggrandizes that product (Adler, et al, 1980).

A study of 250 eighth, ninth, and tenth grade children, found that television viewing was related to beliefs about gender roles. After viewing television programming and commercials that showed gender stereotypes, the students very more likely to give sexist responses to questions about the nature of males and females, and how they are treated by society. Studies have shown that both the commercials and the programming, as separate entities, influenced children's attitudes about gender role stereotypes. Further, there was more evidence of gender stereotyping among children who watched a lot of television compared to children who spend a lot of time reading (Signorielli, 1993).

It is entirely possible that those children who spend a lot of time watching television have other background differences in their lives from those who spend a lot of time reading. Perhaps the social background of their family influences the amount of time they spend watching television as well.

Teaching Television Viewing Skills

To offset the stereotypes presented by television programming and commercials, it is important to teach television viewing skills. Since television is part of everyday life, people need to be become educated consumers so that they can live intelligently with the products of science and technology. In other words, they should be informed masters of their environment and technology in it rather than naive puppets within the television viewing audience.

An example of the value of such education is a viewing skills project in Idaho Falls, Idaho. This project indicates that critical viewing skills instruction does make a difference in the behavior of children, and basic language skills are enhanced in the process (Ploghoft, 1982). There are five basic steps in teaching children to evaluate commercials:

1. Identify what is promised explicitly and implicitly in both the audio and visual portions of the message.
2. Identify the criteria by which the performance is to be evaluated.
3. Determine whether the criteria are appropriate to the product or service.
4. Determine the likelihood of success of the product or service as a solution to the need problem.
5. Establish the value of the performance of the product or service in terms of the individual.

Skills such as identifying explicit and implicit promises, differentiating among verbal, nonverbal, and visual content, and their intended effects, recognizing persuasive techniques, and comprehending commonly used vocabulary are important outcomes in learning to evaluate commercials. In addition, skills in recognizing distortions and subtle messages of gender stereotypes are important.

Individuals who are trained in critical viewing skills will be equipped with criteria for evaluating the intention, motives, and audience response to televised messages. They also will be able to assign value or worth to the message for any given purpose. These individuals can integrate the message and test it against other information bases. They should be able to make inferences and draw logical conclusions (Ploghoft, 1982). With the guidance of an adult, children can learn to practice these critical viewing skills on a regular basis and extend that experience to reading advertisements within other media as well. Yet despite developing critical viewing skills, children are not likely to recognize gender stereotypes if that is what they have come to know. Adults who have knowledge of gender stereotyping often do not notice or ignore the instances of it due to accepting it as a part of "the way things have always been," its very subtle innuendo that suggests roles without being noticeable, the attitude of viewing television as harmless entertainment, and so on.

Future of Television Commercials

Statistics suggest that only about 25 percent of the audience can recall a commercial seen the day before, even when given clues, with the exception of the advertisements that are viewed repeatedly and frequently. For example, while researching the retention of students who view the Channel One news program, Knupfer found that the students remembered nearly 100 percent of the commercials but failed to remember much about the program content (Knupfer & Hayes, 1994). This is most likely due the to daily viewing of the program with frequently repeated commercials. Indeed, many of the students in that study had the commercials memorized.

Several studies have measured recall, comprehension, attitudes, intentions, relevance, believability, and likability assuming there would be patterns between these measures and product choice (Stewart, 1986). Yet further research suggests that these links are influenced by many factors. Factors that influence recall are not the same as factors that influence persuasion. The primary, long-term goal of advertising is to persuade and so it is necessary to shift the focus of the advertising effectiveness research so that it will measure persuasion (Stewart, 1986).

This goal of persuasion can be seen in the rise of infomercials and shopping channels. Larry Grossman, former president of NBC News says that television is moving away from the decade of entertainment to the age of information (Evans, 1994). Computer technology and interactive television will revolutionize our entire retail shopping system. Evidence of this can be seen in the volumes of shoppers who are persuaded to by from such television marketers as QVC.

Information based marketing channels are filling the 500 channel world along with the entertainment channels. Channels such as number 397, The Car Buyer's Channel, are becoming more popular. Upon close examination of their target audience, The Car Buyer's Channel has determined that they should target divorced females who are purchasing a car alone for the first time. Such a buyer is hoping to:

1. Make an educated buy of the best quality and value car
2. In the most convenient and efficient manner
3. In the least amount of time
4. For the smallest amount of money

Since buying a car usually involves reading advertisements, magazine articles, and other consumer information, going from dealership to dealership, test driving, reading product literature, and haggling with sales people for days or weeks, the Car Buyer's Channel is offering a new approach. They are using several techniques that give the potential buyer a sense of value for their money. Some of these include:

1. Product-Specific Long-Form Commercials
   By using 30 minute long commercials about a specific car, advertisers can explain complicated features, advantages, and benefits.
2. Brand/Corporate Image Long-Form Commercials
   Making a particular brand a benchmark for other competitors to be measured against, and instilling brand buying such as buying a Volvo for safety reasons are shown.
3. News
   News events of prices, rollbacks, rebates, engineering, innovations, recalls, and lawsuits are covered during newscasts and give the viewer a sense of value for the car they choose.
4. Model-to-Model Comparisons
   Comparisons are shown as a sort of Consumer Reports magazine.
5. Interviews and Talk Shows
   Interviews and talk shows can show the viewer what the corporations are really like. "Are they environmentally responsible? Testing products on animals? Depleting natural resources or exploiting a Third World country? Or are they giving a portion of their profits to a worthy cause? Recycling wastes? Donating products to the homeless? Today, who you are is as important as what you make." (Evans, 1994).
6. Short-Form Commercials and Direct Response Offers
   Short two minute commercials are shown during the long-form commercials with call-in offers for product brochures, and promotions. Local or regional dealers may market promotions, or car related products such as oil or security systems may be shown that may appeal to buyers.
7. Miscellaneous Programming
   Various programs such as a guide to how well various models hold their resale value, or programs which explain financing plans, or call-in shows about specific topics or models are shown to inform the viewers.

Two recent studies by the Opinion Research Corporation have found that programs like the Car Buyer's Channel are effective because the information presented is on television and the credibility factor is greater than that of newspapers and magazines. They also found that advertising is more believable on television than in the past (Evans, 1994).

Summary

We're watching more television than ever, but we're worried about it. We don't like the violence, or we're bored, and so we surf up to five hundred channels, hoping for something better on the next channel. What we find along with the programming are commercials, and more commercials, all offering something to provide a quick fix to a problem. Leslie Savan concludes that the reason we have a drug problem is because we have an advertising culture that encourages the compulsive taking of something (Savan 1994). Further, some researchers say that advertising also encourages greed and selfishness, and leads to people being less community-oriented, less cooperative, less compassionate, and less charitable (Young, 1990).

If we become aware of the stereotypes and teach critical viewing skills to our children, perhaps we will become informed viewers instead of manipulated consumers. Perhaps we will be able to resist the urge to buy compulsively or want something because we are persuaded by advertising that we need it. Perhaps the gender-targeted advertisements will have less of an impact on the beliefs, value systems, and self-concepts of people, whether male or female. Perhaps we will be able to make different kinds of judgments about whether males need hair replacement products or females need low-interest loans to cover the costs of cosmetic surgery.

Recognition of the blatant and more subtle gender messages is the first step toward resisting the persuasive power of gender-stereotyped televised messages. Careful consideration of personal values is perhaps the next. Most certainly our young people, whether male or female, need the guidance of parents, teachers, and community leaders to help them make well-informed judgments and decisions about the televised gender messages. Perhaps the hardest messages to tackle will be those that are subtle, for so often they are dismissed as harmless little irritations. But in reality, the constant barrage of subtle messages can be just as persuasive and influential as the more blatant messages, thus perpetuating images that people cannot live up to and most certainly should not be restricted to.

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